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C O N F I D E N T I A L ISTANBUL 001977

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN PATRIARCH AT ODDS WITH ECUMENICAL  
PATRIARCH OVER EDUCATION ISSUES AND HALKI

REF: 04 ISTANBUL 401

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) In the course of responding to a routine visa inquiry from the Istanbul-based Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II, CG noted his absence at the November 7 opening session of a conference hosted by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the New York-based Appeal of Conscience (septel). Mesrob's representative delivered his greetings, which began by noting that His Beatitude had not received a conference program in a timely manner, and thus could not attend.

2. (C) Mesrob did cite miscommunication about the program schedule to CG November 8, but added that he thought the Greek Orthodox community might be "a little annoyed" with the Armenians and other minority communities in Turkey for favoring a university solution for the theological training issue. He asserted that the "insistence on the Heybeliada (Halki) private school is politically not so feasible, will create a lot of unrest, and a 1,800 people community should not really make things more difficult for over 100,000 Christians in the country," adding that since he had been more public on this issue recently, he may have "exasperated the Greek hierarchy." Mesrob said he planned to write to the Ecumenical Patriarch with views on possible solutions and proposals for the theological education issue. (Note: Visiting Armenian Archbishop Barsamian, in town for the Appeal of Conscience conference (septel), had told CG that Mesrob was supportive of a university level solution, mentioning that His Beatitude has raised the topic at a November 8 Appeal of Conscience conference dinner. While acknowledging Mesrob's preference, Barsamian opined that opening Halki should be noncontroversial for the GOT. End note.)

3. (C) Mesrob went on to note the size of each Christian community in Turkey, "according to a report that was published some months ago": Armenians, 68,000, plus some 30,000 from Armenia illegally working in menial jobs; Jews, 22,000; Suryanis, 12,000; Arab Orthodox, 4,000; Catholics, 4,000; Protestants, 3,500; Greeks, 1,800.

4. (C) Comment: This is not the first time Mesrob has expressed his preference for a university level solution; he told us last year (reftel) he intended to work with Turkey's Higher Education Council (YOK) to create a theological faculty to train future Armenian priests for two years only, though we are not aware of any action on this. He said at the time the financial burden of re-opening seminaries, too, is considerable. What does appear to be new is the level of frustration he is expressing about what he perceives as intransigence on the part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate about Halki. End comment.

JONES